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SHERRIE LEVINE AND *THE MOTHER OF US ALL*



Sherrie Levine, *The Mother of Us All*, 2008, still from a color video, 45 minutes.

FROM THE BEGINNING, Sherrie Levine's work has been about names and how to count them.

Depending on how one took her early appropriations, they seemed to promise a practice without origins or names and, as Craig Owens wrote, without “the paternal rights assigned to the author by law.”¹ Or they suggested precisely the opposite, an agonic and Oedipal struggle over the name: not no names but exactly two. That was Carter Ratcliff’s early argument: “Her ‘appropriations’ are most effective as expressions of her resentment at the fact that her name will never be as glamorous as Walker Evans’s.”² Now, of course, Levine owns an oeuvre and a proper name of her own, one that doesn’t just denote—as any proper name does—but connotes, carrying with it and standing for terms like *appropriation* and arguments such as Owens’s. She still leans heavily on other artists, but over the past decade or so, those who have written on her have turned to terms beyond appropriation and to other models to characterize the relationship she constructs with her sources, other ways to count names.

Writing of her sculptures after Gerrit Rietveld in 2002, I suggested that Levine worked not as a thief but as a collaborator, a model that kept the proper name, though not exactly intact or in order. As a collaborator, Levine’s role was a supportive one; her grids of steel chairs and divan tables, modeled after Rietveld’s wooden Berlin prototypes, were intended to fulfill his aspirations for the work, a dream put into words by the Dutch designer Mart Stam: Rietveld, Stam wrote in 1930, “wants to arrive at an industrial product. He thinks of *metal*, of *fiberboard*.³ Her collaboration was, of course, uninvited, and her intervention worked according to the logic of the supplement, an addition that is at once too much and not enough, that “intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*.⁴ Levine’s collaboration insisted—or to use Derrida’s term, it insinuated—that Rietveld’s specific, yet not-quite-voiced subjects are those that have always been hers: repetition, the original and the copy, and the name. Not just the names Levine and Rietveld, but those of other collaborators as well: Donald Judd, invoked by ranks of repeated steel forms, and Duchamp and Brancusi, whose reception in America turned on the confusion of sculpture and industrial design, a confusion Levine elaborates and repeats. The gallery, I wrote, “was crowded with presences, with the names . . . of references and collaborators⁵—a whole cast of characters.

A whole cast of characters. This is unusual for a visual art practice, or at least it was until relatively recently, but in the theater, such casts and collaborations are quite normal. So the fact

that the program for a one-night performance of the first act of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's opera *The Mother of Us All* at the Box on Chrystie Street in New York this past April announced the piece as a presentation of "the Little Opera Theatre of NY in a collaboration with Sherrie Levine" should probably not be overinterpreted. Yet Levine's involvement with the opera, her lending of her name, seems to read Stein's libretto as though with a highlighter, drawing from it themes that Levine has played with for some years; they turn out to have always already been Stein's. An opera about the suffragist Susan B. Anthony, *The Mother of Us All* was the second collaboration between Stein and Thomson. (The first was their 1928 opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*.) Thomson brought the commission to Stein in Paris in October 1945; it debuted at Columbia University in 1947, just shy of a year after Stein's death. Working with Thomson, Stein was, perhaps, a more self-aware, less unwilling co-collaborator than Rietveld. She worked as Levine has, not according to the prototype but in collage and appropriation: Significant passages of the libretto are drawn from Anthony's speeches and those of Senator Daniel Webster.

The opera is about Susan B. Anthony, but it would be more accurate to say that it is about thinking about Anthony, about what she represents as a historic name. As though to underline this, and to emphasize the interest she shares with Levine in the odd slippage from the first person to the third that collaborative authorship entails, Stein wrote herself and Thomson into *The Mother of Us All* as characters. From each end of the Box's small stage, Gertrude S. and Virgil T. (sung by Mechelle Tippetts and Dennis Blackwell) punctuate the dialogue as the opera opens, continually interrupting Anthony and her companion Anne, introducing or ending each of the women's lines with "said Susan B." or "said Anne." They provide a setting and occasional omniscience—"She often thought about politeness"—but their interventions also unsettle, continually shifting the voice of the opera from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.

Stein's libretto refers to Anthony throughout as Susan B., not as a way to deflate the suffragist, and not only for its clipped, three-syllable percussiveness, but also as a way for Stein to point to and evade the proper name—the name of the father's property. Stein fills the stage with proper names as Levine had filled the gallery, and her theme in the first act of *The Mother of Us All*

might be read very much as the condition that Owens set out for Levine: the conjunction of the name, the law, and the family. As Susan B., soprano Michelle Serrano Möritz sings of names: “Susan B. Anthony is my name, to choose a name is feeble. . . . A name can only be a name, my name can only be my name.” Stein is reprising her early discussion with Shakespeare over roses, perhaps, but she is also discussing marriage and, as the historic Anthony did, the legal role of women in marriage, emblemized in the husband’s name. Anthony wrote of herself as an example that might “teach the young girls that to be true to principle—to live an idea, though an unpopular one—that to live single—without any man’s name—may be honorable.”⁶ It is a sentiment that Stein translates mathematically, in and around a calculus of collaboration: “I am not married and the reason why is that . . . I could never be one of two, I could never be two in one as married couples do and can, I am but one all one, one and all one, and so I have never been married to anyone.” The securing of a woman’s legal rights within marriage was a primary goal of Anthony’s work before the Civil War, and Stein’s first act turns on it; her second act, like Anthony’s, turns to the vote.



Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s *The Mother of Us All*, 1947, in a production directed by Philip Shneidman, 2008.

Performance view, The Box, New York, April 7, 2008.

The first act returns again and again to men's names, to Lacan's name of the father. Among the characters assembled alongside Gertrude S. and Virgil T. are a host of full-named forefathers: Anthony Comstock, Ulysses S. Grant, Andrew Johnson, Thaddeus Stevens, Daniel Webster, and John Adams (whether the Adams named is the presidential father or his son isn't clear: Stein used the name of the father, but Maurice Grosser, who wrote the scenario for Thomson's score after Stein's death, suggested that the character, a "romantic tenor," is "presumably John Quincy"). These are great names from American history, but Stein's narrative is very loose and her actors refuse to act in historical character—they are little more than names. John Adams died before Susan B. Anthony was born, and while John Quincy may make a little more chronological sense, he doesn't make the narrative any more sensible: The character (sung by Matthew Peña) spends his considerable time onstage wooing Constance Fletcher (Melissa Gerstein), an interesting object choice; Fletcher was a contemporary of Stein's rather than Anthony's, a playwright whose works were published under the name George Fleming. Perhaps what recommended her for the part in act 1 was the title of her best-known play, *A Man and His Wife*, which opened in New York in 1897. While Comstock, Grant, Johnson, Stevens, and Webster were all for at least some years Anthony's contemporaries, they are not part of her story, not the names to which she is most obviously tied. But if Stein had written parts for more relevant figures—William Lloyd Garrison, say, or Horace Greeley—their names would not have been so hollow, nor so at issue: They would not have served so well as arbitrary markers of power—and she knew it. Johnson (Peña), Stevens (David Root), and Webster (Michael Chadwick) join in song: "We are the chorus of the V.I.P. Very important persons to everyone who can hear and see. . . . When they all listen to me, when they all listen to him, by him I mean me. It is not necessary to have any meaning." To which Susan B. replies, "My constantly recurring thought and prayer now are that no word or act of mine may lessen the might of this country in the scale of truth and right."

It is not clear where Stein stands in this exchange, as a feminist or a modernist. Her Susan B. insists on joining autonomy—"one all one"—and truth, a conjunction the discourse around Levine's work would have troubled very early on. What is clear is that the other women

onstage are more interesting than the VIPs, and less rigid than Anthony. As Fletcher's dual and transgendered example might suggest, their relation to the proper name is slipperier, doubled or hidden, as though Stein, like Levine, had been reading Irigaray. Susan B.'s "constant companion," Anne, is not exactly a historical figure, but rather a condensation of two of Anthony's most intimate friends: Anna Dickinson, a constant correspondent in the 1860s, and Anna Howard Shaw, who was at Anthony's side when she died. When Glimmerglass Opera staged *The Mother of Us All* in 1998, on the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention, they played Susan B. and Anne as lovers, as though doubling for Stein and Alice B. Toklas—and they may have been reading Stein correctly.⁷

I've used Levine thus far as a kind of dramaturge; officially, though, she was the opera's art director, and her primary collaborator was Philip Shneidman, the director of the Little Opera Theatre. Shneidman mounted the piece as a chamber opera, with minimal orchestration—just music director Catherine Miller's piano—and equally spare sets and costumes. The actors wore street clothes, limited to a palette of black, brown, and gray. The overall effect was period dress, although the period was flexible; Susan B.'s long black dress and the driving caps worn by Chris the Citizen (Christopher Schaljo) and Jo the Loiterer (Root) belong more to Stein's 1940s than to Anthony's 1860s. Levine's most obvious contribution was the large-screen backdrop that took the place of a more elaborate set: a projected video sunset recorded in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and running in real time. According to the libretto, act 1 begins inside Anthony's house, moves to a political rally, and ends on her front porch. Levine's projection doesn't place the opera, but rather times it; her sky darkens to black, to a certain kind of end, but the first act runs long enough into the night for stars to appear. This afterlife foreshadows Stein's second act, which closes with Susan B.'s return as a ghost after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Her final speech echoes the sunset's long, slow fade: "All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but." Levine's most curious choice was to run the title *The Mother of Us All*, printed in an insistently contemporary—and ubiquitous—Garamond, continuously in the upper-left-hand corner of the projection. Like Stein's narrators Gertrude S. and Virgil T., it works to place the performance in the present of its telling and to place it in quotation marks, making the staging of *The Mother of Us All* about

Stein, so to speak, in the same way that Stein made the opera *about* Anthony. But it is not primarily a textual device. It is most effective visually and dramatically in those moments when Susan occupies center stage alone, against the expansive evening sky. The type flattens her into an image, a character.

The best-known performance recording of *The Mother of Us All* is the Santa Fe Opera's 1976 production, staged out-of-doors in Santa Fe, where its evening backdrop may have looked quite like Levine's video projection. The opera was part of Santa Fe's bicentennial celebrations, and the press release labeled *The Mother of Us All* the "most American of operas"; Robert Indiana's sets and costumes were intended to recall "a dramatized parade." Certainly it was Stein's most American opera, crowded—however arbitrarily—with the nation's history. Thomson described his music for the opera as a similar American olio: "an evocation of nineteenth-century America, its gospel hymns and cocky marches, its sentimental ballads, waltzes, darnfool ditties, and intoned sermons."⁸ For some time now, in her work after O'Keeffe and Stieglitz and Man Ray, and in her numerous invocations of Duchamp's and Brancusi's encounters in New York, Levine has shown particular interest in the moment of Stein's American modernism, and in the often uncomfortable relation between the terms *American* and *modernism*. Levine's last act as dramaturge for the performance at the Box evoked both Stein's Americanness and Robert Indiana's parade. She catered the reception with hot dogs and Budweiser.

Howard Singerman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Virginia.

NOTES

1. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 182.
2. Carter Ratcliff, "Art and Resentment," *Art in America* 70 (Summer 1982), 13.
3. Stam, in Howard Singerman, "Sherrie Levine's Art History," *October* 101 (Summer 2002),

116.

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